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Veterans Day: Supporting our veterans is a mandate, not a slogan!



Guest Commentary

By Bob Filner

Since declaring independence in 1776, we have asked much of our military.

From defeating the British, to ending World War II, to fighting Taliban forces in Afghanistan, America's troops have fought valiantly to protect our great nation. As we pause to observe Veterans Day, we remember the veterans

of past and recent wars and turn our thoughts to the uniformed troops engaged in conflicts abroad.

Every soldier, sailor, airman and marine must be welcomed back with all the care and compassion this grateful nation can bestow. We must rise above political division and stand together to support our veterans.

Failure to keep the promises made to America's veterans is not an option, yet every vote that Congress has taken for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has failed to take into account the actual cost of these wars. The Congress that votes to send troops into harm's way assumes no responsibility for the long-term consequences of their deployment. Each war authorization and appropriation ignores what will be required to meet the long-term needs of veterans.

Whether or not the needs of our soldiers who are wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan will be met is wholly dependent on a future Congress — and the politics that goes along with creating a new budget.

Veterans, family members and their advocates have been working together with Congress, economists and retired military leaders to improve the health care and benefits system for returning service members and veterans from past generations. We have begun the discussion of the consequences of war, not just in financial terms but in the practical reality of day-to-day needs of our troops when they return home.

Not only do we need to focus on the rising estimates of the cost of veterans' care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, but we need to know how the government intends to keep the promises made to America's fighting troops and veterans.

Four years ago, when I became chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, funding for veterans' health care was stagnant, and the government was not responding to the growing and changing needs of veterans. In just four years, we increased the VA budget by almost \$25 billion, an unprecedented 60 percent increase in the VA budget. Congress also successfully passed landmark legislation to change the way veterans' health care is funded by securing advance appropriations for the VA.

No longer is the health care budget subject to political delays, for the first time providing a stable and uninterrupted source of funding for medical care one year in advance.

Congress also passed sweeping legislation to address the concerns of veterans and their families, including improving treatment for emerging signature war injuries, expanding access for returning combat veterans and improving access for veterans in rural areas.

Congress has voted significant budget increases to improve the medical care offered to veterans of every generation and passed a landmark Caregivers Bill to support those caring for veterans. Veterans now have access to a G.I. Bill for the 21st century, covering the cost of a college education at a public university. This fall nearly 300,000 veterans are enrolled in college as a result of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, helping veterans fuel the economic recovery much like the veterans of World War II. Veterans now have better life insurance options, they have access to a modernized VA home loan program, and the VA has begun to respond to the bright light we have shined on the cumbersome veterans' benefits system. The committee has held a dozen hearings this session to monitor innovative pilot programs and examine the best way to produce a system that is up-to-date, accurate and offers a timely delivery of benefits to veterans.

Congress addressed the urgent mental health needs of veterans and took tremendous strides to address the troubling reality of post-traumatic stress. We passed legislation to provide counseling for family members, enhanced screening to address substance abuse, and established a 24-hour hotline for veterans. We also pressed the VA to address the bureaucracy veterans faced when applying for service-connected compensation for post-traumatic stress.

This year, the VA simplified the process to immediately help combat veterans get the help they need as a result of their military service. Now, proof of service in uniform in a war zone, combined with a later diagnosis of PTSD, will be all that is required.

Nearly 2 million troops have been deployed to war zones and more than 5.5 million veterans are currently receiving treatment from the VA, including more than 500,000 veterans of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. We must prepare to care for the veterans of current conflicts by beginning to address the long-term health care needs of combat veterans. Veterans have kept their promise to serve our nation — and we must keep our promises to our veterans.

I will continue to demand that the president provide adequate funding for the warriors — not just the war. As long as Congress is designed to make it much easier to vote to send our soldiers into harm's way than it is to care for these soldiers when they come home, we must fight to stay on the path to making the benefits provided to our veterans first-rate and uncompromised.

On this Veterans Day, we must stand together in the task and honor of caring for veterans and their survivors.

Filner (D-CA) represents California's 51st District and is chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs.